Text recycling: Views of North American journal editors from an interview-based study

Michael Pemberton [1]* Susanne Hall [2] Cary Moskovitz [3] and Chris M. Anson [4]

M. Pemberton   S. Hall   C. Moskovitz   C. M. Anson

[1]Department of Writing and Linguistics, Georgia Southern University, P.O. Box 8026, Statesboro, GA, USA

[2]Division of Humanities and Social Sciences, California Institute of Technology, Pasadena, CA, USA

[3]Thompson Writing Program, Duke University, Durham, NC, USA

[4]Department of English, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC, USA

ORCID:
M. Pemberton: 0000-0002-8860-273X
S. Hall: 0000-0003-3066-1937
C. Moskovitz: 0000-0001-5324-2407
C. M. Anson: 0000-0002-9799-3111

Corresponding author: Michael Pemberton
E-mail: michaelp@georgiasouthern.edu

Abstract

Over the past decade, text recycling (TR; AKA 'self-plagiarism') has become a visible and somewhat contentious practice, particularly in the realm of journal articles. While growing numbers of publishers are writing editorials and formulating guidelines on TR, little is known about how editors view the practice or how they respond to it. We present results from an interview-based study of 21 North American journal editors from a broad range of academic disciplines. Our findings show that editors' beliefs and practices are quite individualized rather than being tied to disciplinary or other structural parameters. While none of our participants supported the use of large amounts of recycled material from one journal article to another, some editors were staunchly against any use of recycled material, while others were accepting of the practice in certain circumstances. Issues of originality, the challenges of rewriting text, the varied circulation of texts, and abiding by copyright law were prominent themes as editors discussed their approaches to TR. Overall, the interviews showed that many editors have not thought systematically about the practice of TR, and they sometimes have trouble aligning their beliefs and practices.

INTRODUCTION

While plagiarism has long been a concern in the domain of scholarly writing, text recycling (TR) – often problematically called 'self-plagiarism' (Moskovitz, 2017) – has recently generated considerable interest. TR is the reuse of material (prose or visuals) from a previously written (source) document in a new document where all of the following conditions are met: (1) the material in the new document is identical to that of the source, or nearly so, and (2) at least one author of the new document is also an author of the source document.

One of the earliest published mentions of TR in relation to professional academic writing is a 1988 *College Composition and Communication* essay in which the author lists 'reused prose'

Key points

- Interviews with 21 journal editors across disciplinary areas demonstrate a wide range of opinions about the acceptability of text recycling (TR).

- Editors feel strongly that journal articles must be original, but definitions of 'originality' vary greatly.

- Editors have few concerns about recycling from unpublished work, but they hold divergent views about what constitutes 'publication'.

- Editors often recommend that authors rewrite text, so it does not appear to be recycled, and concerns about copyright infringement frequently motivate this advice.

- Editors' personal beliefs about the value and acceptability of TR are sometimes at variance with their practices as editors.

- Further work is needed to ensure that journal policies and editorial practices related to TR are based on shared standards and recent research rather than individual opinions.

among several deficits of professionals who write on computers (Grow, 1988). However, only after the turn of this millennium did organizations involved with publishing or research ethics begin establishing formal guidelines. In 2002, IEEE approved a new 'Policy on Self-Plagiarism' (IEEE, 2019). In 2003, the US Office of Research Integrity funded Roig (2004) to develop the first widely available set of guidelines on TR, 'Avoiding plagiarism, self-plagiarism, and other questionable writing practices: A guide to ethical writing'. The same year, the leading society of computer science scholars, the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM), added the 'Self-Plagiarism Policy' to its information for authors (ACM, 2003).

In the following years, many journal editors, especially in STEM and health science journals, began to share their views on TR in editorials. Some of these editorials (Lowe, 2003; White, 2011) condemn the practice broadly, stating that authors should follow the same practices of attribution whether reusing their own published material or someone else's. Others, such as Bird and Sivilotti (2008) and Šupak Smolčić and Bilić-Zulle (2013), allow that the practice is sometimes acceptable – depending on the quantity of material reused, where in the paper it occurs (e.g. Methods vs. Results), and whether the source is cited. Still others, such as Kravitz and Feldman (2011), argue that, beyond mere conditional *acceptability*, 'there are sometimes good reasons for re-using certain textual elements (particularly in the Methods and literature review)' (p. 1). At least one editorial (Offutt, 2018) argues against *any* condemnation of TR. These diverse views have also appeared in other scholarship (see, e.g. Andreescu, 2013; Bouville, 2008; Bretag & Mahmud, 2009; Roig, 2008; Scanlon, 2007). For a review of the discourse on TR and related

matters in the social sciences (see Eaton & Crossman, 2018); for an overview of the debate in the health sciences, see Moskovitz, 2017; for a discussion of the legal issues (see Samuelson, 1994).

In 2013, in response to a request from editors of some of their journals, BioMed Central's biology and medical editors undertook the development of a publisher-wide policy on TR in collaboration with the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). This appears to have been the first formal policy initiative on the topic, resulting in what is certainly the most visible and widely adopted set of guidelines to date (Biomed Central, 2013). The guidelines emphasize the relationship between reuse of textual material and the rehashing of content.

In general terms, editors should consider how much text is recycled. The reuse of a few sentences is clearly different to the verbatim reuse of several paragraphs of text, although large amounts of text recycled in the methods might be more acceptable than a similar amount recycled in the discussion.

When deciding whether to take action, *editors should consider whether there is significant overlap with a previous publication and how significantly the degree of overlap impinges on the originality of the content for the journal's audience*. While the factors discussed below should be taken into consideration when deciding on the significance of the overlap, editors need to decide whether the author *has reused text legitimately or has misrepresented previously presented ideas or data as new* (emphasis added) (p. 2).

In other words, if text is recycled in an attempt to pass off old content as new work, it is improper; if text is meaningfully recycled in the service of advancing substantively new content, it can be legitimate.

As the first formal attempt to establish widespread standards for TR, Biomed Central and COPE have done much to clarify the general ethics and expectations, establishing TR as a practice that can be legitimate or not depending on the context. Yet, even the editors who developed these guidelines made clear that these were 'not intended as the definitive last word on the subject, but rather a work in progress' (Harriman & Patel, 2014, p. 1). One limitation of the guidelines is that they leave it entirely to editors to decide when TR is and is not appropriate. Given the wide range of opinions on the ethics of TR and the shortage of published empirical research, we understand why COPE would hesitate to set specific thresholds or markers delimiting acceptable versus unacceptable practice. Nevertheless, such ambiguity means that each editor must individually adjudicate every instance of TR, a situation that is both time-consuming and likely to result in inconsistent and unpredictable outcomes for authors. Another limitation is that they are written strictly for editors and thus do not address the needs of authors, whether professionals or students.

Given the crucial role that journal editors play as both gatekeepers and standard setters in their fields, further development of TR policy requires a better, more systematic understanding of how editors conceive of and approach the issue. To date, the only published empirical work on editors' views on TR is that of Bruton and Rachal (2015), who used a mixed-methods study of questionnaires and follow-up interviews. Their study is limited to journal editors in the field of education, and their report includes

only a cursory summary of their interview data. Halupa and Bolliger (2013), Halupa and Bolliger (2015) and Halupa, Breitenbach, and Anast (2016) published a number of studies on 'self-plagiarism' using interviews, but these all investigated the issue of students 'double dipping' – submitting the same work for multiple courses – not TR under our definition.

In order to address what seemed to be a gap in the research literature, three authors of the present study earlier undertook a survey-based study of editorial board members (both editors and non-editors) of top journals across the academic spectrum (Hall, Moskovitz, & Pemberton, 2018). Major findings from this study were (1) few board members believed that TR was always unacceptable, (2) there is a lack of consensus about when TR from one published paper to another is acceptable, and (3) those with more editorship experience tended to be less accepting of TR than those with less experience. From this survey-based study, we were able to learn much about *what* these gatekeepers believed, but little about why.

Here, we report on a new study of TR conducted through in-depth, structured interviews with editors of major scholarly journals across a broad range of humanities, social science, STEM, and health science disciplines. This interview-based study builds on our prior survey-based study by offering journal editors the opportunity to think and talk at length about their experiences of and views on TR. Our earlier survey, which used mostly multiple-choice and Likert scale questions, asked respondents to make judgments about how particular textual features might impact their perception of TR's acceptability in a manuscript (e.g. whether the TR appeared in an introduction, a literature review, a methods section, or a results section). It did not invite them to explain the underlying rationales for those judgments other than in an open-ended 'comments' section at the end. The interview protocol in this study was designed to elicit more detailed, nuanced responses and prompt editors to think about the principles and criteria that shaped their perceptions. Interviewees were asked about their own experience with TR as writers and their experience dealing with instances of TR as editors, partly as a way to highlight any conceptual differences between those contexts. Other questions addressed the appropriateness of TR in relation to a variety of factors, such as the amount and type of material reused, issues related to authorship and attribution, and the context in which recycling occurs – focusing on the writing of scholarly articles for publication. In this paper, we first describe our methodology, including the interview protocol and our analysis of the data, and then explore some of the most significant results, including several of the major themes that emerged from the interviews: the definition of 'original' work, rewriting text to avoid TR, the source material's 'publication status', and the occasional conflict between editors' beliefs about TR and their editorial practices. Finally, we offer some conclusions and implications for further research and editorial practice.

METHOD

This study was conducted according to an IRB protocol approved by Duke University under a memorandum of understanding with Georgia Southern University, North Carolina State University, and the California Institute of Technology. We conducted 21 interviews with editors of academic journals in 2018. Of the original 23 interviews, 2 were not included in analysis because the participants were managing editors. Because we wanted to speak with scholars who had meaningful editorial control of a journal and who themselves had experience as academic writers, we targeted current or recent editors-in-chief or associate editors of English-language academic journals who held academic faculty appointments. We did not include interviews with managing or technical editors as we wanted to focus specifically on the perspectives of editors who reviewed articles and interacted with authors about matters of content and rhetorical presentation.

We solicited participants by email – either from our list of participants from our previous survey-based study (Hall *et al.*, 2018) or directly via journal websites. No compensation was offered to participants. We conducted interviews following a written protocol (Appendix S1, Supporting Information), and if a participant was at one of our home institutions, a researcher at another institution handled that interview.

Interviews were semi-structured, following a protocol we tested and refined with colleagues who had editorship experience. Before the interviews, we emailed participants a handout to be used during the conversation (Appendix S2) and an informed consent statement to review. The handout included a definition of TR which matches that shared above, with some elaboration. Interviews were conducted and recorded using the Zoom video-conferencing platform. We began interviews using both video and audio so that the interviewer and participant could greet one another. Then, we eliminated the video connection and began recording, capturing audio only, as we thought some participants would feel more comfortable talking with researchers without a live video feed. We also believed the assurance of anonymity was more compelling for participants knowing that no video recording of the interview would exist.

After the informed consent was accepted, we provided an overview of the interview's topics, which included:

- Part 0: Definition of TR
- Part 1: Personal experiences (as writers and authors) with TR
- Part 2: Editorial experiences with TR
- Part 3: Exploring TR variables in the context of journal editing/reviewing
- Part 4: Final questions about beliefs about TR
- Part 5: Demographic information

During the sessions, the interviewer also posed relevant follow-up questions based on answers the participants provided. Interviews took between 30 and 60 min. Audio recordings were professionally transcribed and then anonymized.

Several of the questions in Part 3 asked editors to refer to handouts that were shared with them before the interview (Appendix S2). The examples in the handouts were intended to show a range of purposes, audiences, contexts, and publication forms, and respondents were not directed to discuss each of

them individually or to limit themselves only to the examples we provided. Our intent was to elicit responses regarding the critical features that made some kinds of TR appropriate and others inappropriate.

In analysing the interview transcripts, we adopted an inductive typological approach, first becoming familiar with and discussing the data using a modified constant-comparison method advocated in grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Because the interviews were so varied and rich in detail, we found it challenging to establish emergent categories or codes without some further synthesis (Boyatzis, 1998; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Roulston, 2001). As a result, we first created structured summaries of each interview that highlighted key opinions about TR, rationales behind those opinions, contradictions and tensions within the interview, and any other salient qualities. Each interview was summarized by two authors, and the summaries were compared for consistency. From these summaries, we extracted key themes, anchoring those to specific locations in the interviews. These themes will be presented and discussed below.

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

Participant description

All participants received their doctoral training in North America, hold appointments at North American universities, and use English as their primary workplace language. Fifteen participants self-identified as male and the remaining six as female. At the time of the interview, 12 held the rank of professor and 8 the rank of associate professor; 1 participant held an appointment at a US research agency.

Fifteen participants held the position of Editor-in-chief, Editor, or Co-editor-in-chief, and 10 were Associate or Subject Editors (This is greater than the number of participants because some participants held positions at multiple journals). The average length of time in editorial roles (sometimes at multiple journals) was 14.2 years, with a range of 2–36 years. We had equal distribution across the humanities, social sciences, and STEM field groupings; see Table 1 for further details about the discipline of participants.

Empirical findings

We recognize that the sample size of this set of interviews (21) is not wholly sufficient to support broad claims about academic journal editors' attitudes toward TR, but we believe it is large enough to demonstrate a number of recurring themes and ethical principles that editors use as touchstones when thinking about the practice. In fact, one of the more surprising findings of our analysis is that these commonalities tend to transcend disciplinary boundaries. The rationales editors use to justify their positions toward TR – both for it and against it – do not tend to cluster along disciplinary lines. Humanists, STEM researchers, and social

TABLE 1 Demographic information

Disciplinary clusters		Gender	
Humanities	7	Male	15
Social Science	7	Female	6
STEM	7		
		Journals edited	
Specific discipline			
American studies	1	1	9
Anthropology (archaeology)	1	2	9
Biological anthropology	2	3+	3
Biomedical engineering	1		
Chemistry	2	**Editing experience (years)**	
Civil Engineering	1		
Classical studies	2	2	2
Communications	1	3–4	2
Economics	1	5–10	7
Environmental health	1	11–20	3
Literature	2	20+	7
Medical humanities	1		
Pharmacy	1	**Professional position**	
Philosophy	1		
Psychology	2	Professor	12
Structural engineering	1	Assoc. Prof.	8
		Editor	1

scientists often hold similar opinions about TR, independent of their areas of study or epistemological differences. For that reason, we have opted not to focus on disciplinarity as a key feature in our analyses.

Similarly, there do not appear to be any clear correlations between editors' experiences with TR and a particular set of beliefs. Of the five interviewees who said they had no experience with TR as editors, three described themselves as 'lenient' or 'liberal', while the other two described themselves as very strict, saying authors should never recycle more than a sentence or two. Of the two editors who said they had frequent encounters with TR, one said recycling 'doesn't bother' him much, and the other said he prohibits TR completely, regardless of the amount. Accordingly, we have also chosen not to factor editorial experience with TR into our analyses.

In the sections that follow, we report on some of the most significant themes and principles that emerged in editors' discussions of TR, including how to define 'originality' and 'publication', when it might be necessary to have authors rewrite or revise text, and whether TR could leave journals and authors open to accusations of copyright infringement. Because TR always includes a 'from' (the publication where a text first appeared) and

a 'to' (the manuscript/article in which it is being reused), the terms used to refer to these texts and relationships can sometimes vary. In this article, we use the terms 'original' text, 'previously written' text, and 'source' text synonymously, just as we use 'new' text, 'destination' text, and 'subsequent publication' as general equivalents. We also examine the ways in which editors' personal views of TR sometimes clash with their own editorial practices, leading them to set or follow journal policies that they actively question. Whenever possible, we distinguish between interviewees' experiences as *editors* and personal experiences as *authors*. When the context is not specified, the interviewees focus on their editorial practices. Finally, we discuss the meaning and implications of these results and conclude with some recommendations for future research initiatives that would help clarify acceptable TR practices for editors and authors.

Originality

While we did not specifically invite editors to consider the issue of originality in their responses, the prelude to our questions about TR variables (see Part 3 of the interview protocol) described a scenario in which a hypothetical submission 'makes what you think is an original and valuable contribution to the field'. In their responses to the questions that followed, 'originality' proved to be critically important to interviewees' assessments of the appropriateness of TR. Nearly all of the interviewees, 18 of 21, addressed the issue of textual originality when discussing the ethics of recycling, and all members of that group concurred that journal articles are expected to make an original contribution to disciplinary scholarship:

105: Well, I would emphasize that when you're writing a published work, you want it to be original ... in presenting your work, you want to present original, new material.

122: There must be a new contribution that's substantial.

Even so, there were sometimes significant differences about how the terms 'new' or 'original' should be defined or applied in specific circumstances. In a few cases, interviewees took a hard-line stance, insisting that virtually every bit of text in an article, regardless of the rhetorical purpose it served or which section it appeared in, should be distinct from any text that appeared in any prior publications:

110: I would say that if you submit a journal article, nothing in that submission should be verbatim the same as any other article that you have submitted elsewhere or that you have published elsewhere... Ultimately all the things you publish should have text that is unique to that publication.

115: Original material cannot come from somewhere else. To me, this is the clearest indication of why you cannot recycle text and images.

In these cases, interviewees interpreted the expectation of *originality* to mean that all of the textual material should be unique. This, however, seems to be a minority view. Only three editors were completely unwilling to accept any recycled text, and they all referred to the contracts authors signed attesting that no material in the new manuscript had been published elsewhere. The other 18 editors, however, regularly asserted that factors such as context, purpose, and quantity were more important than overall uniqueness when determining whether or not TR was appropriate; 5 of them, in fact, argued that a certain amount of TR may be unavoidable.

In terms of context, a majority of these editors also felt that the appropriateness of TR hinged on where that recycling appeared in an article and what rhetorical function it served. For example, they noted that, because results, interpretation, and discussion sections were far more likely to present an article's original research contributions than other parts of a paper, any instance of TR there would almost certainly be considered inappropriate.

108: I would be very unhappy to see text recycling taking place in interpreting the data or the text. That's ... If this is supposed to be an original research paper it shouldn't be there, that is you're supposed to be saying something original about the idea that's being expressed in this paper. And if it's just another version of the same thing, then I would not be happy with it.

109: Interpreting data or text, as I understand it, that's really the meat of the article. If the main point or main set of data or text, or analysis and argument is more or less the same either in actual prose or the substance, then that would raise serious questions as to the originality of the piece.

On the other hand, methods sections, descriptions of datasets, and (for some) introductions or literature reviews were often perceived to be parts of an article's structural apparatus, not places where original contributions were situated or expected, so a majority of these editors (13) tended to be more lenient about TR in these sections. (Nine of the respondents felt that TR could be appropriate in several article sections; four stated that recycling would be acceptable in methods sections alone.)

101: And so, in my judgment, if I saw, say, recycled text in a methods section, and it was maybe a few sentences, or even five or six sentences, I wouldn't really care, and I don't think I would do anything.

105: I think, in describing methods for a procedure, that using an exact statement from a prior work would be considered acceptable.

Editors' rationales for allowing TR in methods sections, however, were not limited to the belief that they fulfilled primarily

structural and/or supportive roles. Eleven editors pointed out that incorporating recycled text in these sections was simply more efficient than trying to rewrite previously published material, especially when the original passage had been carefully crafted for accuracy and clarity. In addition, recycling descriptions of methods and processes across articles was sometimes seen as a way to reduce ambiguity and enhance methodological consistency for readers who might be following an author's ongoing research agenda (noted by five interviewees). Three editors stated explicitly, in fact, that they believed this use of TR was providing a service to their discipline.

> 117: [W]hen it comes to describing methods or theoretical frameworks, there I most often think that we're better off recycling text if the original sourced text explains something clearly and well, and we know that it actually describes the procedure or the framework in a way that someone else could read it and understand it. I would prefer that the next time someone else reads about that procedure or framework somewhere else … it's written the same way… So, for those two I actually think recycling on the whole is better for the field than not recycling.

Even so, editors tempered their willingness to accept TR, even in methods sections, with concerns about the quantity of text being reused. While 14 editors were generally untroubled by a few sentences of recycled text in a manuscript, 12 stated explicitly that a paragraph or more would make them uncomfortable. When the amount of recycled material exceeded editors' level of tolerance, they would frequently suggest that authors massage the text and bring recycling down to acceptable levels.

Rewriting text

One strategy some editors use for lessening or eliminating recycled text in articles is to ask authors to rewrite their original textual material rather than including verbatim duplication. We were curious about the extent to which editors were likely to suggest this approach to contributors when manuscripts contained recycled material. For this reason, our interview protocol did not include questions about rewording/rewriting text *unless the editors themselves raised the issue* in the course of our discussions (see Part 1, question 3 *ff*).

Editors' perceptions of the value of rewriting text to avoid TR were mixed. In contrast to those who saw good reasons for TR in some cases, others highlighted the generative value of editing and revising previously published material rather than recycling it. Four editors claimed that rewriting was a relatively easy thing to do; one pointed to the value of rewriting as a way to make the article 'fresh' for the author; two argued that rewriting text usually makes it better and/or more interesting; and seven indicated that rewriting previously published texts was almost always necessary to meet the needs of new audiences, arguments, and contexts.

> 121: I would say that each piece should make a distinct scholarly contribution to the conversation. And even if those pieces, each piece brings in material from other settings or other pieces, that that material needs to be re-crafted under the specific rhetorical purpose and contribution of the piece. And anything that is not re-crafted needs to be quoted and cited.

Interestingly, a majority of the editors (15) stressed the importance of rephrasing reused prose so that the new versions would not *appear* to replicate material from the source (with Methods sections being a notable exception in most cases). In contrast to statements suggesting that rewriting material leads to more effective communication, these responses called for authors to make superficial changes to wording and sentence structure so that the recycled passages would not be recognizable as such. (It is worth noting that students are often instructed not to practice this kind of inappropriate patch writing; Howard, 1992) Editors offered a variety of reasons for this recommendation. For most (15), it was a way to avoid accusations of impropriety; for a few (4), it was a manoeuvre to avoid potential concerns about violating copyright; and for others (2), it appeared to be a strategy to keep the text from being flagged by plagiarism detection tools such as iThenticate:

> 123: So, we would say [to authors], this came to our attention through iThenticate software, and we just don't allow whole sentences and paragraphs, so please rephrase it when you do your final revision.

> 115: Typically, we would be very careful about copyright, and that's why images have to be changed. That's why the text cannot be recycled, as well. So yes, we are very wary of that. Typically, that's one of the reasons we would give authors why it is that we care so much about this.

When authors opt to recycle text rather than paraphrase or revise it, 12 editors said they would insist that the source material be appropriately cited, and 4 indicated that they would require authors to put all such extracts in quotation marks, effectively removing them from the category of what we are defining as 'recycled text'. Correspondingly, the same number of editors (16) also expressed concerns about the degree to which unacknowledged TR could lead to legal problems for the journal if it were found liable for copyright infringement, an issue discussed in more depth below.

Circulation and accessibility

Few of the interviewed editors were concerned with authors recycling text from unpublished work; however, what they considered to be 'published' varied significantly. These differences were sometimes related to disciplinary norms and expectations: for example, many viewed 'conference papers' as unpublished

documents because they are considered to be presentations of works in progress rather than completed work:

> 109: A conference paper, not a problem because they're not published. I mean the conference paper, orally presented, everybody does that. Since they're not published, we have no way of determining if the text from that is being recycled, and conferences are the place to test out your idea. That's not a problem.

> 102: [T]here is a sense that partly what conference papers are for is developing ideas and working stuff out …

Other respondents made a distinction between presentations that were solely oral and those that also appeared in written form in 'conference proceedings', which are common in some disciplines:

> 118: It gets sticky when a conference has their own semi-formalized conference book that comes from the proceedings, and then it's the equivalent of a publication. And there's some conferences [sic] that are like that that are actually peer reviewed … [a]nd this is a very clear case because if you publish in that, then it's clearly been published. And then there's some that it's not clear whether it's been published because the conference proceedings are rather obscure and hard to get.

Many editors saw the size of the source text's original or intended audience as an important factor in determining whether or not TR was acceptable. Most (18) indicated that documents such as grant proposals, internal reports, and conference papers are generally intended to be read (or heard) by a limited number of people, are therefore 'private' rather than 'public', and can be recycled freely.

> 111: [A] conference paper-- that's going to be for a small audience, not for the audience that I hope my journal's reaching, and certainly the number of subscribers is larger than anything we have at a conference. So that's not a problem. Grant proposal, same thing. Grant report, same thing.

In related fashion, some editors referred specifically to the issue of accessibility, sometimes described as a researcher's ability to locate a particular piece of scholarship (12) and sometimes as a text's degree of 'transience', (3) as important. The more limited the access to the original material (either because it's an 'internal' document or because it cannot be easily found online or in scholarly databases) or the more ephemeral the genre (such as poster presentations and orally delivered conference papers), the more willing editors would be to accept TR.

> 115: But if it's something that is I guess used within a limited context, in a transient manner, like a poster, it would be put up in a room and then taken down after that, for those cases I do not see the value of changing pictures and text.

> 118: Yeah, a lot of what we're talking about is text and if a conference paper is not really a paper but just a talk then who cares, that was just vibrations in the air.

One of the reasons why publication status was an especially salient issue for many editors when thinking about TR was not just because they wanted to ensure their journal publishes entirely original work but also because they were wary of the legal consequences that might result if the amount of recycled text raised concerns about violating copyright.

Copyright

Editors exhibited a wide range of beliefs, knowledge, practices, and misunderstandings of copyright in relation to TR. Five explicitly said they had not thought about copyright in relation to recycling before – and some evinced notable surprise when they recognized that they had not.

> 114: Oh. I have not thought about that, but I would say … my assumption is that authors retain some form of the copyright, and so therefore can reuse that text. But, I don't know, there may be journals where the author gives away the copyright … So if there are, then, God, I'd have to know that. Oh, no! There's a whole 'nother layer here now. I mean, they may not own their words anymore, yikes … I guess I'd have to figure that out.

Others, regardless of their personal views on the ethics of TR, indicated that the possibility of copyright infringement was a significant concern for their journal. Ten participants made explicit statements that the potential for infringement could or would affect how they handled manuscripts that contained recycled material. For some, this concern was expressed in relation to some threshold beyond which infringement might occur; for others, the concern had to do with who held copyright:

> 117: Assuming that the author has the right to use their own text, so assuming we're not talking about infringing copyright, the amount wouldn't matter to me … If the author no longer has copyright to the work, that wouldn't just be text recycling, that would be infringement, and we [the journal] would not be a party to it.

Of those who did not express concern about possible infringement, responses to the issue of copyright varied. One said that copyright concerns were irrelevant to her because she would not accept any previously published material regardless of copyright.

Two said that they understood TR to fall within fair use and that copyright was likely a non-issue. Two mentioned author–publisher contracts that would allow authors to reuse materials from prior work, and one of them spoke specifically about their own journal's contract:

> 111: [T]he standard copyright contract for [this] journal is to say that … well, the clause which says the author has the right to re-publish the material, you know in another work for which he's the prime or she's the main author, provided that the recognition of the publication in the journal is part of the new publication… Our copyright contract … tries to address that, to say the main substance of the essay [must be] new and original, right.

These interviews suggest a wide variation in editors' knowledge of copyright law as it pertains to TR. Two participants were knowledgeable enough to know that infringement would not occur for some sources of recycled material – either when authors retain their rights (through, say, Creative Commons licensing) or when the source and new work have the same publisher. In those cases, these editors said that TR would be more acceptable:

> 123: Our journal is called Open Access, so the author owns, technically the copyright. Might give them a little more leeway [for recycling from articles in this open access journal]

Others held erroneous beliefs, with at least three participants expressing the incorrect belief that attributing recycled text to its source protects against the possibility of copyright infringement. Under US law, attribution does not play a significant role in determining whether infringement has occurred. If the amount and type of material recycled would constitute infringement, adding a citation would not eliminate that infringement.

> 102: I would think that the reproduction of text over which someone had a copyright interest without attribution is unlawful. Presumably, if it's your property, you can recycle it without attribution. [emphasis added]

Finally, while the potential for copyright infringement was an important factor in many editors' decision to limit or prohibit TR in their editorial roles, there was little expression of concern that their knowledge of copyright law was limited or might be inaccurate.

Beliefs versus practices

Some editors demonstrated differences between their beliefs about TR and their practices. This manifested in several ways, but a noteworthy pattern emerged in a group of editors who reported that their stances on TR were more liberal than those held by their peers and/or the publisher of their journal. These editors shared the perception that there was a strong taboo against TR in their respective fields, and several directly reported that their efforts to understand the rationale for this taboo yielded unsatisfactory results. Three participants shared stories of being admonished by a mentor in graduate school to avoid 'self-plagiarism' but not being taught why this was important:

> 107: In that case [a paper written in graduate school], I ended up recycling a fair amount of text from a published paper without really thinking too much on it and my advisor at the time said, 'Oh no, that's self-plagiarism and we definitely don't want to do that.' That was kind of I think the first time where I had, or at least in my memory, encountered that being where someone thought that was a major issue.

We asked participant 107 what rationale that advisor provided, and he explained that he did not recall any:

> 107: I was trying to think back on that [what rationale the advisor provided for avoiding self-plagiarism]. I think if I recall, I think it mostly has to do with propriety. At least in terms of my memory, I can't remember any kind of fundamental reason why except that it was basically frowned upon.

Beyond graduate school, some of these editors continued to encounter the TR taboo among their colleagues. At this point, they sought out reasons for their peers' beliefs and received unsatisfactory answers:

> 104: I have been surprised during my discussions with colleagues that people are so adamant about simply changing an adjective here or a word choice there to avoid the issue of text recycling. It seems to me that that is a colossal waste of time and not a huge ethical issue and that it might actually impede scientific communication between people … Is it really an ethical problem or is this just something where we're sticking to our guns?

While several editors found it frustrating that their colleagues could not adequately support their belief that TR is wrong, the lack of credible reasons has not led these editors to ignore or flout the taboo. It still shapes their work as editors and teachers, resulting in some interesting conflicts between beliefs and practices.

For example, one editor indicated she is 'super careful' as a writer not to recycle between published articles, despite the belief that this extra work wastes time and 'just seems silly' [119]. As an editor, however, that same participant reported that

she would accept a significant amount of recycling from a published source as long as the new work was substantively original, and some acknowledgement was made by the author of the recycling. In contrast, another editor would still require authors to rewrite recycled text exceeding a paragraph in a submission, despite her personal belief that such work is a 'colossal waste of time' [104]. A third editor indicated he might or might not ask an author to rework a paragraph of text recycled from another article, and he made clear that he personally just does not care much about this. However, he said that if the paragraph was 'picked up by an algorithm' (e.g. iThenticate), 'then it's like, okay, you have to change this' [107]. A fourth editor [120] indicated that because of his 'emotional baggage from grad school' (his research ethics training), as well as concerns about copyright infringement, he would nonetheless insist that any TR longer than a phrase be directly cited by authors in his journal.

These inconsistencies between belief and practice are not limited to our participants' work as authors and editors; they extend into their work as teachers and mentors. Four participants indicated that they train their graduate students and younger colleagues to follow the norms that they themselves do not always follow or believe in.

101: I would err on … more of a hard line if I'm training graduate students. I feel like it would be a disservice to them to say, 'Do what I did,' or essentially tell them what I did. So I feel like, if I was training a graduate student, saying that there are … you publish something and these are your ideas, I know you think you own them but, once they go in print and they're copyrighted, they essentially chiselled in cement, so to speak, and that set of words really can't be used elsewhere, no matter how you might think of it. I guess I would probably be a little bit hypocritical in the sense [of] what I do versus what I would teach.

Ten of the participants mentioned a concern that TR could damage a scholar's reputation, and several – including some who characterized their views of TR as more 'liberal' than their peers' – mentioned this concern specifically within the context of training students or colleagues. Our interviews suggest that a great many new scholars enter their writing lives believing in a broad prohibition against TR, whether they are trained by mentors who earnestly believe in the prohibition or those who do not.

DISCUSSION

Our analysis of the interview data corroborates and extends the findings of Hall *et al.* (2018), demonstrating the lack of consensus among editors about the acceptability of TR in its various manifestations and pointing back to the professional uncertainties described in the introduction to this article. While opinions about some kinds of textual reuse are uniform across the landscape of the publishing industry, such as the prohibition against passing

off another person's intellectual property as one's own, TR enjoys no such widespread agreement: practices are idiosyncratic; beliefs and opinions vary; no distinct patterns show up as a function of discipline; and official policies, when they exist, offer few certainties and little guidance for editorial decisions.

Although it is tempting to view these results as a reflection of discrepant but entrenched perspectives, it is important to consider how the diverse nature of the interview pool and the overall structure of the interview process impacted the responses we received and our sense of how TR is inscribed in the publication practices of different disciplines. As we mentioned in the Analysis section, our study's findings are limited by the number of editors we were able to interview, as well as the fact that some fields such as Computer Science (where TR is perceived to be relatively frequent) were not represented. Nevertheless, the responses we collected in this study express a range of beliefs about TR that we believe are likely to align with editors' positions across a broad spectrum of disciplinary domains. First, the interviews showed a wide range of prior thinking about TR – both in depth and substance – with some comments reflecting carefully considered opinions and others driven by vague and unsupported statements about propriety. A number of interviewees explicitly stated that they had never before considered some particular aspect of TR. We were also struck by variations in how informed the editors were about TR policies for their own journal or in their discipline. A few were unaware of or could not describe specific policies or procedures governing the practice of TR in material submitted for publication or deferred to others in the publishing chain who were ostensibly responsible for checking compliance with whatever requirements existed. For some editors, legal responsibility strongly influenced their thinking, while it had barely occurred to others. When it did come up, it was often based on a distant understanding of the law. Differences in genre and context of publication (a dissertation, a peer reviewed article, a conference proceeding, a written talk delivered to an audience, etc.) created a patchwork of beliefs about what is acceptable TR and what is not. Broad statements about ethical responsibilities often stood in for more specific explanations governing practice.

While some editors held fluctuating positions about the acceptability of TR, others seemed to struggle with the definition of TR itself, even though they had been provided with a definition at the beginning of the interview and were asked whether they understood it. Over the course of the interview, some editors conflated TR and plagiarism, slipping into statements about quotation practices that had been explicitly excluded in the provided definition. A similar kind of misunderstanding occurred when participants were asked to imagine – as context for a major section of the interview – that they had received an article *whose original content made it worthy of publication* in spite of some recycled text. Some editors made a point of commenting on concerns about duplicate publication and the replication of ideas rather than the reuse of specific pieces of prose.

Finally, because we began with questions about the editors' personal experiences with TR and then transitioned to their

editorial practices, disjunctions between the two were frequent as some of our previous discussion of the data has shown. While this might suggest, in some cases, that the editors had evolved in their thinking, the evidence was inconsistent: some editors recalled using TR as younger scholars or graduate students and then wavered in their beliefs about those same practices when reviewing submissions to the journals they edit. For example, some editors started with 'hard-line' statements against the practice of TR, claiming that once the words are expressed the first time, they cannot be expressed a second time in the same way because such a practice is 'lazy' or is a kind of intellectual cheating. But this stance weakened considerably as they reflected on diverse occasions, contexts, and genres for writing. Some of the editors' hesitations also appeared to come from a lack of prior experience with TR as editors, but just as often, they seemed to be formulating their opinions in a process of discovery occasioned by the interview itself.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study has demonstrated and reconfirmed significant variation in how editors of peer reviewed academic journals view the subject of TR across disciplinary areas. Opinions are mixed, practices are diverse, and reasons for editorial positions are wide-ranging. Taken at face value, the data show not that TR is contextually determined and agreed upon within different communities of practice (in the way that authors use different norms of production and collaboration when producing text) but that it is inchoate and unsettled both within and across such communities.

An important question arising from these conclusions is whether a set of generic standards or guidelines should be developed to inform practice across a wide range of academic disciplines. With some exceptions, we hesitate to make such a recommendation here. Substantial research has demonstrated that the norms and standards of text production and circulation are the product of specific communities of practice (Bazerman, 1981; Kent, 1991; Wenger-Trainer & Wenger-Trainer, 2015). In the realm of plagiarism, for example, some communities accept the unattributed copying of other authors' texts because the original text does not garner credit or credibility for the original author and is replicable in the interests of the broader community (Anson, 2011; Anson & Neely, 2010). Even in academic communities, certain kinds of texts (such as committee-authored reports or curricular outcome statements) are routinely borrowed (or borrowed from) without attribution. To impose a single standard for TR would suggest that some practices in STEM disciplines, such as the limited recycling of methods sections in substantially new contributions to the literature, should apply in contexts that do not typically include methods sections or that place a high value on unique expression.

At the same time, our research suggests that a number of reforms are needed. First, the lack of standard terminology makes it difficult for editors and authors to know where to look for policy about TR and what such policies mean. In the same way that

the Council of Writing Program Administrators (2003) distinguishes, in instructional contexts, between 'plagiarism' and the 'misuse of sources', the term 'text recycling' (advocated by COPE) could be adopted as the value-neutral representation, especially in place of loaded terms such as 'self-plagiarism', which is often used in contradictory ways.

Second, the confusion about copyright laws our study has demonstrated could be alleviated with current and accurate legal guidelines for editors and authors. Some editors of USA-based journals seem to hold the incorrect belief that including a citation to recycled material or putting the material in quotation marks eliminates the potential for copyright infringement. As Stearns (1992) explains, '[A]ttribution is largely irrelevant to a claim of copyright infringement. Where copying is authorized, the author has no common-law right to attribution; such a right is nonexistent unless created by contract. Conversely, infringement can occur even when a work is properly attributed if the copying is not authorized-for example, a pirated edition of a book produced by someone who does not own the publication rights' (513).

Others hold the belief that any reuse of recycled material not indicated as a quotation constitutes infringement, even though it likely falls within fair use under US copyright law. As Frankel and Kellogg (2012) point out, 'By allowing a defendant to make transformative, non-competitive uses of the copyrighted work, fair use follows the constitutional mandate to promote progress while still protecting the core rights of the original author, which in turn maintains the incentive to create' (1). Of course, we recognize that editors and publishers may prefer to 'play it safe' by not allowing recycling in their pages; however, this desire for legal safety may impose unwarranted restrictions on authors. Editors should have a better understanding of relevant law – but because this area of copyright law is ambiguous, an up-to-date legal analysis is needed (Moskovitz & Hansen, 2019).

Third, although we found substantial variation in editors' beliefs about the appropriateness of TR in journal manuscripts, there was broad agreement that the use of unpublished, limited circulation materials such as grant proposals, conference papers and posters, and dissertations and theses was acceptable because these genres are steps towards a final published product rather than ends in themselves. Yet even though many of our participants mentioned that they sometimes recycled such materials in their own writing, our data suggest that few journals have explicit guidelines for authors about this. Publishers should decide which types of unpublished material are acceptable to recycle in their journals and include explicit statements to that end. Such statements would reduce arbitrary decision-making, speed up review, and eliminate unspoken taboos regarding such practices – which would be especially important for those at the start of their scholarly careers.

Finally, given the complexities of TR, editors should make sure their journals' policies and editorial practices are based on shared standards and recent research rather than individual opinions. The creation of ad hoc statements also makes it more difficult for authors to know what is allowable because policies would vary widely between publications. While a universal policy

on TR is unlikely to be applicable or acceptable across all scholarly domains, organizations such as COPE and the World Association of Medical Editors might offer a limited menu of policy options from which publishers or journals could choose. The Text Recycling Project (http://textrecycling.org), of which this study is a part, is working to support this goal by contributing data and empirical research that can inform the creation of such documents and be incorporated, as desired, into policies that describe the accepted conventions and practices of TR in different scholarly domains. We encourage others to join in this research as we move forward and to participate as informants, co-researchers, and disciplinary colleagues.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article:

Appendix S1 Phase 1, part 2 interview protocol.

Appendix S2 Interview handouts.

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